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## Religious leaders and Syrian refugees meet in Lebanon

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Halba, Lebanon -Here, in the northern Lebanese district of Akkar, Catholic-Maronite, Sunni, Greek-Orthodox and Alawi villages are scattered all over the landscape. The Syrian border is a 15 minute drive to the north of the northern Lebanese town of Halba, and residents can hear shelling in Syria at night and episodes of sectarian strife occurring regularly.

In Lebanon, religious dignitaries often give speeches on the inter-relatedness of the three Abrahamic religions, interfaith cooperation, solidarity and peace and love for everyone. Unfortunately such speeches are often just words. One recent event was different. Not just about words, it was about putting theory into practice in the face of a horrendous war raging just a few kilometres away by meeting face-to-face and urging communities to come together.

During Ramadan this year, an Alawi Sheikh, a Sunni Mufti, a Greek-Orthodox Metropolitan and a Catholic-Maronite Monsignor, along with a group of over 100 Syrian refugees and 50 local Lebanese met to share a meal together. The unlikely group of diners gathered in front of a beautiful mountain top restaurant in the village of Miniara, near Halba for an iftaar (a meal after a day of fasting), showing that religious leaders and their communities can live in peace together if they want to.

The group represented all major religious communities present in Akkar, and Syrian refugees who had arrived from Qusayr, Homs and other parts of the war-torn country just weeks earlier. And guests of honour included the Sunni Mufti of Akkar, the Greek-Orthodox Metropolitan of Akkar and Wadi Nasara (Syria), the Alawi representative for the Akkar district and a representative of the Maronite Archbishop of Tripoli.

Out of the spotlight, but very much present, were refugees, both men and women of all ages and all socio-economic backgrounds: Moqtada, a math teacher who had his left leg shot to pieces three months ago; Hisam, the electrician with the sparkling eyes and firm handshake; Walid, 26-years-old and a star basketball player - if only he were not on crutches; Abdul-Karim, whose wife died on the 8-day march into Lebanon and who is now a single dad with 5 toddlers.

Putting refugees together in one room with members of the Alawi community was no easy undertaking. The Alawis are often associated with Syrian President Bashar Assad's secular regime - one side of the violent conflict that has led many to flee Syria. And when the Alawi Sheikh stood up to address the room, with a member of his security team behind him, tensions in the room were palpable.

And yet, the Sheikh's message of peace hit the refugees as sincere, and they applauded him, which seemed a bit like a miracle in itself.

The refugees seemed thirsty for the truth of the atrocities they had faced to be acknowledged, and for the wider public and the dignitaries of the region to recognise their situation. Here in this safe space, they felt they were being taken seriously, opening the door for new opportunities for different faith communities to come together to address some of their shared concerns.

That this should have worked in the Akkar district of all places is particularly significant. Akkar is both a safe haven for the swelling numbers of Syrian refugees, and, also a breeding ground for fighters. In Akkar, one of the poorest regions of Lebanon with the greatest number of refugees, potential for tension is greater than elsewhere in the country. The situation is fragile here.

Yet, perhaps because of this, many people are also more conscious of the necessity of preserving peace at all cost. And this iftaar and other efforts by Relief and Reconciliation for Syria (R&R Syria), a group made up of concerned citizens in Europe and elsewhere, are showing that religious leaders and their communities can live together in peace.

The next R&R Syria interfaith event will take place on 22 September on the occasion of the Christian holiday of Saint Mura, gathering all four religious communities and their leaders for a joint walk to a nearby Christian sanctuary, followed by a children's festival and a communal meal for hungry walkers.

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